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THE UNDEFENDED GATE^{*}

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The last quarter of a century has seen a remarkable increase of interest in the teaching of English. From a lowly position, perhaps the lowest, in the school curriculum, it has risen to a high, perhaps the highest, position. If it is less well paid than it should be, at least its value and importance are appreciated. It has enlisted the services of able thinkers and writers. It is perhaps the most popular subject in the educational magazines. It has been made the theme of many books.

A number of societies, of which the National Council is, I hope, a shining example, have been founded for the sole purpose of promoting the teaching of English, and all of these societies are in a flourishing condition.

The methods of teaching have been carefully scrutinized by experts and the improvements that have been suggested and put into effect have increased the interest of the pupils and reduced the waste of energy on the part of the teacher.

In short, the teaching of English has for the first time in its history been organized and put on a basis of efficiency.

Nevertheless, in spite of this advance in both the theory and practice of the teaching of English, there is a suspicion in many quarters that the results are not commensurate with the effort.

I do not refer now to the recent article of Mr. Edward Bok,

^{*} Presidential address delivered before the National Council of Teachers of English at the annual meeting in Chicago, November 28, 1913.

or to similar attacks, of which there have been many, in the periodical press, but to the opinions of thoughtful observers and to the doubts of teachers themselves. To give a single example: At a meeting of the North Central Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools in 1912, President Judson of the University of Chicago called attention to what seemed to him to be a failure, or at least a disappointment, in this branch of instruction. In the face of all the agitation about English studies, there was no sign, he thought, that the boys and girls of today like literature any better than those of a generation ago, or write any better. To quote President Judson's words: "We have in our schools a large English faculty, consisting of well-trained instructors and eager teachers who are trying faithfully to accomplish very definite results. These results, I suppose, are to train the student to speak and write English well, to become familiar with the best literature, and above all to become fond of the best literature. I don't feel at all sure that we are getting those results. I don't notice that students entering college write perceptibly better English than those who entered college a generation ago, before all this work was done. I don't notice that their grasp of English literature, and especially their love for good literature, is very much better, if any, than it was then. . . . Judging by the kind of reading done by most of our young college students, I raise the question whether we have got so far as we hoped we were going to get when we entered upon this very extensive program of instruction in English."

For my part, as I have said before in public, I do not look for any great improvement, even in a generation, for such betterments must come slowly. Indeed, when we consider some of the untoward conditions, such as the over-loading and under-paying of teachers and the necessity of adapting the work to the children of immigrants, it may appear that we are doing well if we merely hold our own. Nevertheless, making all due allowances, I am bound to say that less has been accomplished in raising the general average of proficiency in writing and of literary taste than might reasonably have been expected, and it is high time that we faced the condition of affairs and inquired seriously into the causes of it.

If progress is slower than it should be, the reason which seems a priori most plausible is that we are exposed to some malign influence against which proper precaution has not yet been taken. "What boots it at one gate to make defense and at another to let in the foe?" asks Milton's Samson, and teachers of English may very well put the same question to themselves with reference to their teaching. Of what use is it to drill pupils in grammar, to sweat over compositions, to spend month after month in the reading and study of English masterpieces, if steadily day by day some powerful disintegrating agency nullifies all that we have accomplished? Where shall we look for this destructive influence? What is the undefended gate that lets in the foe at the rear as fast as we repel it from the front?

If we examine our defenses narrowly, perhaps we shall find many undefended gates. The influence of the uncultured family will be suggested by one; the carelessness in matters of English of other teachers in the school will be suggested by another; and so on. But there is one gate wide enough to let in all the serried hosts of evil, and as yet there are but few on guard within it. I refer to the daily newspaper.

That the daily newspaper is the most powerful and the most pervasive influence of our day and nation will, I think, be conceded. It is not going too far to say that the aims and ambitions and modes of thought and expression of the younger generation are largely molded by its contents. Not even the scriptures can now compete with it. The Bible, when it was read at least once a day in every Christian family, was, as an educational force, of incalculable value. No one who has ever listened to such family reading is likely to deny its effect upon the character of youth. It sank into their lives. It shaped their ideals. The images and phrases which this reading embedded in their minds served in after years as a stay in time of trial, as a guide in bewildering moral situations, as consolation in the hour of bereavement. But the Bible is no longer read as it was once. To its high place the newspaper has now been promoted. It is the newspaper which is now read daily in the American family—in the un-Christian as well as in the Christian family. It is the newspaper which now sinks

into the lives of our young people, and, filling their minds with its phrases and its pictures, shapes their characters and supplies the motives for their conduct.

Time was when the newspapers made slight appeal to the young boy or girl. They were written by older persons for older persons. The news they contained was about things for which young persons cared very little, and their editorial articles were usually composed in a style that few children and not many adults could easily follow. But that time is long past. The newspaper, like the school, has discovered that the child exists and that his interest is a great asset. It has discovered that the child is not only father of the man, but is also keeper of the father's purse. So the newspaper has thrown out its net and captured the child. For him the "funny paper" was invented. Those crude drawings which resemble so curiously the drawings of the insane, and the still cruder and insaner letter-press that goes with them, have now become the child's playmate and companion. It is not too much to say that in the funny paper the child now finds his earliest contact with literature and art.

From the funny paper he passes naturally as he grows older to the sporting page, with its wells of English undefiled, and then the step is easy to the crimes and divorce cases and sob stories of the other pages, until he has been made free of the whole black-and-white city of the news columns.

That this daily contact with the newspaper has its good side, I freely grant. But it also has its evil side, and it is into this that I wish now to inquire. Wherein does the newspaper as we know it today exercise a baneful influence on the mind and temper of the young? We can answer this question by asking first what qualities we may expect in an ideal daily newspaper, and then wherein the newspapers as we actually find them have failed to live up to their responsibilities.

Remembering that the newspaper comes into our homes every day, that it is accessible to everyone who can read, and that it endeavors to secure in one way or another the attention of every member of the household, we may at least demand of it the qualities that we should demand of any other daily visitor who might desire admission to the family circle.

First, then, we may demand that the newspaper shall be courteous. It must be a gentleman in spirit, manners, and language. We surely would not admit every day to the intimacy of the family circle a vulgar, ill-mannered boor who shouted at the top of his voice, indulged in horseplay, and, with sly leer and tongue thrust in cheek, retailed the crimes and scandals of the past twenty-four hours. We might admit such a visitor once on trial, but the second time he appeared, especially if we found him whispering his indecencies in the ears of our sons and daughters, we should thrust him out of doors with slight ceremony. And yet there are newspapers going today into millions of cultured households which are precisely of this character. It is no exaggeration to say that these newspapers scream, that they swear, that they tell filthy stories, that they parade brutal and suggestive pictures, that they fill the house with violence and uproar and disorder. If the spirit of such a newspaper were incarnated in a human being, we should set the dog on him whenever he appeared on the doorstep.

A capital illustration of the failure of the newspaper in this regard is seen in its reluctance to make suitable apology to those to whom it has by accident or by carelessness done an injury. Here again the grossness of the evil will stand out sharply if we compare the newspaper's procedure to that of a human being.

A man who accidentally pushes you off the sidewalk into a muddy gutter will at least beg your pardon. If he does not, he is no gentleman, but either a boor or a cad. But the newspaper which has pushed you into the gutter, rolled you in filth, and even given you a kick or two in the ribs, will not only refrain from apologizing for its rudeness but, if it pays any further attention to you at all, will usually jeer at you and make you the butt of the spectators, thus adding insult to injury. I do not know of any newspaper in this country which freely, promptly, and ungrudgingly apologizes for its mistakes and gives to the apology the same space and prominence which it gave to the injurious article. Therefore I do not hesitate to say that every newspaper that I am accustomed to read is to this extent either a boor or a cad. They may all be admirable newspapers in other respects, but in this respect they are simply contemptible.

A lawyer who resorts to unworthy means to win his case is called a shyster. A physician who wantonly violates the ethics of his profession is termed a quack. There should be some epithet, some very rude name, by which we could stigmatize the newspaper that through cowardliness or callousness fails to meet the demands of common courtesy.

The most remarkable thing about this attitude of the newspaper, I may say in passing, is that it is profitless. It cannot be shown, I think, ever to have secured a single subscriber or a single advertisement. It is bad business policy. Nothing, surely, except a fine old crusted tradition keeps this vicious practice alive in decent newspaper offices.

In the second place, we may demand that our daily visitor shall be truthful. An occasional fib we can condone and forget, but persistent, shameless lying is intolerable. Now I shall not in my haste say that all newspapers are liars. Indeed, I shall go to the other extreme and concede that with a few exceptions the aim of all newspapers is to tell the facts exactly as they occurred. But telling the facts is one thing and telling the truth is another; at least that is so in newspaper offices. Facts, like figures, can be made to lie. The same set of facts may, under the manipulation of two different writers, present in the one case a true and graphic picture of the event, in the other case a distorted, biased, and misleading picture. The reporter's desire to make a good story out of every occurrence or interview—a natural ambition which is carried to an absurd length in the modern newspaper office—often leads to an over-emphasis of unimportant details that is worse than downright falsehood.

In a hundred different ways; by the wording of headlines, by the size of type; by the prominence given to the article; by the comment in the editorial column; it is possible for a newspaper to make out of a sordid little commonplace, of no value to anybody in the world, a story that will be read with idle or itching curiosity by the people of a whole nation.

Let me give an instance from my own experience. Two or three years ago I read a paper in this city before a society of scholars. The subject and the treatment being of a highly technical character,

the paper was naturally intended only for specialists. The city editor of a certain daily, however, thought he saw in the title the promise of a good story. So he sent a reporter, not to ascertain the truth, but to get the story. For half an hour I labored with that misguided young man, trying to convince him that he was on the wrong trail. Then, since he would not be convinced (perhaps because he had already written the article), I finally said to him, in effect: "If you want to print a good story, go ahead. Write whatever you please. Don't mind me or my paper. I can stand it if you can." And so the story, in a form which doubtless provoked Homeric laughter among my colleagues, was published in this newspaper, and was afterward circulated about the United States in the press dispatches. I still hear from it at intervals.

But we should require that our daily visitor be not only courteous and truthful; we should require him to be of a clean and wholesome mind. We cannot take home to our hearths and bosoms the man who in his daily conversation is morbid, or cynical, or licentious. It is perhaps in this respect that the newspaper fails most grievously to live up to its pretensions. It would be unjust to attribute to all newspapers the bad ideal upheld by Mr. Brisbane for the Hearst publications, namely, that the newspaper is the poor man's whiskey, or, in other words, that the chief aim of the paper is to give a series of thrills. That is Mr. Brisbane's own special aberration. But the papers which do not habitually feed to some extent the morbid appetite of the public for sensation can be numbered on the fingers of one hand, omitting the thumb.

It is a pity that the newspapers cannot segregate their more revolting news matter. Absurd as it may sound, I have often thought of proposing to some newspaper proprietor to establish in his paper a Filth Section or Sterquilinum, into which might be dumped those matters which now offend, or should offend, the eye and nostril of the reader. Such a section might be printed in red ink or on crimson-hued paper so that those who wanted it could readily find it and those who did not could readily avoid it. I believe that many newspaper men would, in theory at any rate, welcome such a quarantine, and I can imagine a conscientious

editor, when he had filled the section with its odorous contents, calling like Pilate for water and washing his hands.

But why, it may be asked, give so much time to these generalities? Why have I not dwelt upon that feature of the newspaper which is most pertinent to the subject, namely, the kind of English that is employed: the slang, the colloquialisms, the violations of grammar and style, the split infinitives, the dangling participles, the abuse of the words "transpire," "inaugurate," and "enthuse"?

Well, I am not troubled a great deal about these things. My protest goes deeper. It is the spirit I fear, not the form. Unkempt style, slangy diction, even bad grammar are in themselves of no great moment when compared with violations of the great principles of amenity, truth, sincerity, wholesomeness, and self-restraint, which are the principles of good writing and of appreciation as they are the principles of conduct. The formal errors which the language of journalism tends to encourage, serious as they are, may be overcome by correction and patient drill, but the brutality, the boorishness, the spirit of faking, the condoning of indecency and vulgarity and sensationalism that manifest themselves in the modern newspaper and which are quickly absorbed by the young and sooner or later reappear in their habits of thought and expression—what manner of classroom procedure can pluck out these rooted evils?

If the character of the newspaper and its influence upon our pupils are such as I have indicated, what are we going to do about it? Rid ourselves of the daily visitor, whether he be welcome or unwelcome, we cannot. The newspaper is as indispensable to the life of the body politic as the air we breathe is to our physical bodies. We must, therefore, get on with it as best we may. Fortunately, it is within our power as teachers of English not only to mitigate the present evils, but even to effect in time a radical reform. How this can be done will appear when we reflect that the newspaper is of all public institutions the most sensitive to changes in popular taste. It must conform to them or disappear. Teachers of English, therefore, by cultivating the likes and dislikes of their pupils, may by degrees create a demand for a newspaper of a wholly different type. If all the teachers in this Association

should make their pupils eagerly desirous for certain features and qualities in the newspaper, those features and qualities would in course of time inevitably appear. Or, if the faces of the children were set against certain evils in the newspaper, those evils would in a few years be greatly lessened or wholly eliminated.

The defense I would propose, then, for the undefended gate, is a very simple and obvious one. Since we cannot abolish or immediately reform the newspaper, let us do what we can to enlighten the pupils. Let us instruct them in regard to this great institution upon which they are, or are to be, so dependent. Let us teach them what the newspaper is; what its faults and virtues are; how the better newspaper may be distinguished from the worse. Let us teach them also the art of reading the newspaper, an art which might be cultivated with advantage even by older persons. This sort of training seems to me to be of so much importance that I will venture to suggest that in every high school, in the Junior and again in the Senior year, a definite time, say a week, be set apart for instruction in the newspaper. It should be known as Newspaper Week. In the hours devoted to this subject I would have the teacher discuss various newspapers and point out their comparative value both as purveyors of news and as molders of public opinion.

If I were giving such instruction I should handle the subject without gloves. I should, for example, demonstrate to the class the almost criminal recklessness and brutality of certain papers in their handling of the news. I should read to the pupils the following extract from a story published in an eastern paper at the time of the Titanic disaster, at an hour when little or nothing was known of the particulars of the accident:¹

Stunned by the terrific impact, the dazed passengers, many of them half clad, rushed from their staterooms into the main saloon amid the crash of splintering steel, rending of plates and shattering of girders, while the boom of falling pinnacles of ice upon the broken deck of the great vessel added to the horror. In wild confusion men, women, and children rushed about the saloons and cabins of the great steamship as though driven out of their senses. . . . In a wild, apparently ungovernable mob, they poured out of the saloons

¹ I take the illustration from a lecture delivered by Mr. Ralph Pulitzer, of the *New York World*, before the Columbia School of Journalism.

to witness one of the most appalling scenes possible to be seen. . . . For one hundred feet the bow was a shapeless mass of bent, broken and splintered steel and iron. . . . Then came the shudder of the riven hulk of the once magnificent steamship as she slid back from the shelving ice upon which she had driven and her bow settled deeply into the water. "We are lost!" was the cry that rose from a hundred throats.

Having read this passage to them, I should follow it up by the accounts of eye-witnesses of the occurrence, and I should then ask the pupils what attitude should be taken toward a writer or a corporation that in cold blood, for purely mercenary ends, fabricated such a story and applied it as an excitant to the already overwrought nerves of the community. Again, naming certain partisan papers, I should not hesitate, if I were the teacher, to say that in spite of their pretensions I regarded them as enemies of the people. I should point out examples of their prejudice, insincerity, and cowardice. But I should not endeavor to keep any of these horrible examples from the pupils or keep the pupils from the papers. On the contrary, I should put copies in their hands and ask them to judge for themselves whether the newspaper accounts could be trusted. In particular, it would be well for a class to verify at first hand by personal investigation the truth of some newspaper story, if a story suitable for this purpose could be found. An exercise of this sort would have permanent value, both as a lesson in the difficulty of ascertaining the facts of any occurrence, and also as arousing a critical attitude toward news-stories in general.

Nor should the funny paper be neglected, though here, as elsewhere, the approach must be tactful. Nothing is gained with young people by denying the humor of pictures and letter-press which they really enjoy. We must remember that they laugh at these things not in order to irritate us, but because they find them genuinely amusing. By adroit questioning, however, and especially by a comparison of this depraved humor with that of the older caricaturists and the better modern cartoonists, a spirit of criticism might be aroused and a foundation laid for the cultivation of taste. If the pupils did not cease to like the vulgarities of the comic supplement, and probably they would not, they might at least cease to like them grossly.

It need hardly be added that the good newspapers should come in for their share of approval, and that the good features of even the worst of them should be generously applauded.

But the kind of instruction thus far outlined, while it would help the pupil to choose the better paper and avoid the worse, thus raising in time the standard of journalism, would not after all meet the most urgent need. We cannot wait for the newspaper to be reformed. We must take it as it is and make the best of it. Hence arises the desirability of instruction in what I have called the art of reading the daily paper, an art so complex and difficult that I must content myself in this brief address with a mere illustration of it. If I were attempting to teach it to a class of secondary pupils—a thing which I should be loath to do, not having mastered it myself—I should say to them, among other things, that there are two ways of reading a newspaper, the idle man's way and the busy man's way. One is a bad way, the other is a good way. One tends to make the reader superficial and scatterbrained, the other tends to make him intelligent and thoughtful. The difference is this: When the idle man greets his daily visitor in the morning or evening, he says to him: "Here I am in a lazy, thoughtless mood, with nothing in particular to do or to think about. It is your business to distract my mind. Entertain me, amuse me, thrill me, shock me. And in doing this say whatever you like, be it good or bad, helpful or harmful, decent or indecent. Since I am going to spoil an hour somehow, I may as well listen to you as do anything else."

But the busy man does not say this. He says rather: "Come, now, I have a few pertinent questions I want to ask you, questions of politics, foreign affairs, business, and happenings at home and abroad that I must know about in order to be a good citizen. Answer these questions and I am done with you. If you can't answer them, take yourself off. I will see you again tomorrow." And I should go on to say to the class that any reader who would for a week or a month meet the newspaper every morning or evening with a peremptory challenge like this would be surprised to discover not only how quickly he could get through his reading, but how great an amount of useful information he could glean.

And in time he would also be surprised at the ease with which he could consign irrelevancies and trash to the place where they belong—the fireplace.

If in the course of my paper thus far, I have drawn a dark picture of the daily press, let me conclude by saying that I am well aware that there is a brighter side.

It stands to reason that the newspaper, if it can be so great a power for evil, may, under the influence of a different ideal, be just as great a power for good. A daily visitor who is courteous, tactful, and sympathetic, who never says anything which he believes to be untrue, who is scrupulously clean in thought and word, who is wise and tolerant and unselfish—what may he not accomplish for young people as teacher, guide, and friend? Who, except the parents themselves, can hope to compete with him? Such a newspaper, I am tempted to say, would almost render the teacher of English superfluous. When it arrives, as no doubt it will in time, the undefended gate will no longer need defense.

The following *pièces justificatives* are appended without comment:

REPORT OF THE CHICAGO CITY NEWS BUREAU

The modern newspaper is more powerful than the Bible, according to Professor Fred Newton Scott, head of the departments of rhetoric and journalism of the University of Michigan, who addressed the National Convention of the Teachers of English this morning at the Auditorium Hotel. While he was sparing in his praise for the daily newspapers, he was stinging in his criticism of their bad manners and rhetoric.

Professor Scott is president of the convention, which gathered for a three days' session this morning. His subject was "The Undefended Gate." His talk in part follows:

"President Judson of the University of Chicago recently asserted that the boys and girls of today wrote no better than they did a generation ago. They do not desire better literature and we are handicapped in teaching them better diction.

"The evil comes from the daily newspaper. It is the most powerful thing we have; not even the Bible can compare with it. The younger generation is moulded by it.

"The newspaper comes into the home every day. If a man came into our homes and used vile language, talked slang and scandal, we would eject

him, but the newspaper tells filthy stories and is just as bad as the bad man, and is tolerated.

"A man pushes you off the sidewalk and apologizes. A newspaper won't do that. A newspaper uses scandal and muckrakes as much as it pleases, but will not come out with a statement of correction. It will just continue to laugh at you so that you have no way of getting back.

"A newspaper should adhere to telling facts; instead of that it distorts facts. A reporter tries to make a good 'story' by distortion just in order to please the city editor. He will take a little thing and make a great big bad story of it.

"The newspaper fails in most every respect. It shapes the child's ideals, it is the child's consultation. The newspaper is read by Christians and non-Christians. It sinks into the lives of our young generation. It throws out its nets to the child through its crude drawings that resemble the insane. The child grows and its mind is eventually colored. As he continues his reading of the newspapers, he reads the sporting sheet, saturated with slang.

"The newspaper is the poor man's whiskey and stimulant. I have often thought of proposing to a city editor that he print a filth column and place it in a certain part of the paper in red ink. After finishing the task of editing the column I am sure that the editor would call for water and wash his hands.

"The newspaper uses an uncanny style, bad diction and violates the principles of good writing. The indecency and vulgarity which appears in the newspaper have their evil effect on the younger generation and the pupils in the class rooms. This is one of the hardest things which the teacher of English has to eradicate.

"In time it will be possible to cultivate the likes and dislikes of the student and by teaching him even the worst papers will conform to his tastes. The newspapers cannot be reformed right away. One way of teaching the students the proper appreciation of the shortcomings of the newspapers is to devote one week of every month to a study of its poison and criminal recklessness.

"The idle man wants a thrill and a shock in order to pass much of his time away. The business man wants news of foreign affairs, news of the markets and business. The newspapers aim to please the idle man more than they do the busy man."

EDITORIAL ARTICLE IN THE *Chicago Tribune*, DECEMBER 1

CLOISTERED IGNORANCE

There has been no sadder prophet since Jonah than Professor Fred N. Scott of the University of Michigan, who was pathetic, because helpless, describing for the National Convention of Teachers of English the "evil that comes from the newspapers."

When this academic type discloses itself, and when consideration is given to the fact that a mind so narrow is charged with the duty of broadening the horizon of young people, we almost fall into despair of the republic.

"The newspaper comes into the home every day," said Mr. Scott—to select merely one paragraph from his address. "If a man came into our homes and used vile language, talked slang and scandal, we would eject him, but the newspaper tells filthy stories and is just as bad as the bad man and is tolerated."

Into the cloistered precincts of Mr. Scott's life there should come only Walter Pater and the only window in his wall should look into a rose garden.

The fragrance of his thoughts and the serenity of his mood should never receive even the suggestion of the world without where pain and work, sin and saintliness are woven into the fabric. But Mr. Scott, in a cloister protected from inelegant diction and guarded from the crudities of life, is not a teacher. There is or ought to be something else in that term, and there ought to be in the character of the man who assumes the title restraints which would make such ill-considered, untruthful statements impossible of his utterance.

EDITORIAL ARTICLE IN THE *Chicago Tribune*, DECEMBER 6

PROFESSOR SCOTT'S ADDRESS

Professor F. N. Scott of the University of Michigan gave the presidential address before the National Council of Teachers of English in Chicago, November 28. Mr. Scott was reported in the *The Tribune* the following day in the most uncompromising, unconditioned, ill-considered statements regarding newspapers and their terrible work for evil. *The Tribune* protested against such criticism from an educator.

The Tribune has not changed its mind regarding what Mr. Scott was *reported* as saying, but it finds itself largely in accord with what he *did* say. The report furnished by the City Press association by its errors almost justified the condemnation of newspapers ascribed to Professor Scott.

With the text of the address at hand we find that the speaker was discriminating and qualifying. His criticism of newspapers which constantly violate, or to the extent that they do violate, rules which must govern other activities was severe but justified.

The injury done Professor Scott was in attributing to him generalizations which described the production of newspapers as wholly malevolent, brutal, and vicious, and the effect as destructive of morals, taste, and decency.

A protest against such statements was warranted, but it was Professor Scott's accident and *The Tribune's* misfortune to have his words as they obtained general publicity chosen not by himself but by another person.